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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 001075

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SUBJECT: OTHMAN PUTS ONUS ON MANILA FOR IMT DECISION AND
RESTART OF TALKS

Classified By: Political Counselor Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 (b and
d).

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) Malaysian facilitator for the Philippines Government (GRP)/Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) peace talks Othman Abdul Razak, speaking with Polcouns December 4, placed blame on the GRP for Malaysia's November 30 withdrawal from the International Monitoring Team (IMT) and would not speculate on the return of Malaysia's IMT contingent. Manila's delay in reconstituting its peace panel and perceived limitations on the IMT's ability to investigate recent violence contributed to Malaysia's IMT withdrawal, though lack of movement in the peace process was the fundamental factor. Othman conveyed his anger toward Japanese envoys who had pressed aggressively for Malaysia to maintain its IMT force. With confidence between the GRP and MILF at a very low level, Othman expressed skepticism that GRP peace advisor Esperon's visit to Kuala Lumpur later in December would allow for a return to peace talks. Othman emphasized that on the subject of Mindanao there were no policy differences between outgoing Prime Minister Abdullah and his heir apparent Deputy Prime Minister Najib. Polcouns highlighted the value of the IMT's presence and Malaysia's role in resuming the peace process and urged Othman to think about practical next steps since the alternative to not pursuing a negotiated settlement would be worse. Othman affirmed Malaysia wanted a negotiated resolution to the Mindanao conflict and stated that Malaysia's long-term interests were not served by having an "armed Muslim insurgency" on its borders.

¶2. (C) Comment: Othman appeared more cynical in this encounter than in many of our previous meetings. While clearly irritated by recent discussions with the Japanese and Australians, he seemed eager to share his views with us, presumably to influence U.S. thinking. Othman placed the primary burden on Manila to take steps to restart the peace process and did not appear ready to discuss specific MILF responsibilities. End Summary and Comment.

Factors Behind Malaysia's IMT Withdrawal

¶3. (C) On December 4, Polcouns met with Othman Abdul Razak, intelligence advisor to the Prime Minister and the Malaysian government's facilitator for the GRP/MILF peace talks. Polcouns asked Othman about Malaysia's decision to withdraw its remaining IMT participants as put into effect on November 30. Othman responded by placing the blame on Manila, and the GRP's unwillingness or inability to pursue genuine negotiations with the MILF. Without a peace process, the IMT

served no purpose, Othman emphasized. Noting the Philippines Supreme Court ruling against a preliminary agreement on territorial definition of the Bangsamoro entity, Othman said the MILF now questioned the extent to which Arroyo's administration could negotiate a deal.

14. (C) Othman described two additional factors that contributed to Malaysia's withdrawal from the IMT. First, according to Othman, the GRP put limitations on the IMT's ability to fully investigate the killing of civilians and the involvement of three MILF commanders that precipitated a resumption of GRP/MILF military clashes. Othman suggested that the civilian casualties could have been paramilitary forces, and this possibility should have been subject to an independent IMT investigation. Under Manila's restrictions, however, the IMT could not carry out its mandated function. Second, the GRP did not reconstitute its peace panel in time to make a formal request for Malaysia to extend its IMT involvement. Othman took this as a sign that Manila lacked seriousness in the overall process. Othman brushed aside our queries on the MILF's views of Malaysia's IMT withdrawal.

No Speculation on Return to IMT; Anger at Japanese Push

15. (C) Polcouns highlighted the value of the IMT's presence to the overall security situation in Mindanao and in the context of resuming the peace talks. In response to Polcouns' queries, Othman would not speculate directly on the prospects or specific conditions for Malaysia to rejoin the IMT. While remaining friendly and talkative in our meeting,

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Othman stated he had been angered by repeated Japanese approaches to pressure Malaysia to remain in the IMT. Othman also admitted he took offense during a meeting with Australian diplomats in which they characterized Othman as "biased" in favor of the MILF.

Unclear Basis for Restart of Talks

16. (C) With confidence between the GRP and MILF at a very low level, Othman expressed skepticism that the planned visit by GRP peace advisor Esperon to Kuala Lumpur later in December would be sufficient to set the stage for a resumption of talks with the MILF. Othman presumed that Esperon would use the visit to present Ambassador Rafael Seguis as the head of a reconstituted GRP peace panel as a step in preparation for a pre-Christmas announcement by President Arroyo that peace talks were ready to recommence. If the GRP only brings news of a new peace panel, Othman said, "it is hardly worth my travel to Mindanao" in order only to present the new GRP line-up to the MILF leadership. Absent some proposals from the GRP, which Othman did not specify, he questioned whether and how the talks could resume, and from what baseline. The MILF did not want to start from scratch or roll back from tentative agreements reached as of early August.

Malaysia Does Not Want "Muslim Insurgency" on Doorstep

17. (C) Polcouns urged Othman to think about practical next steps since the alternative to not pursuing a peace process would be worse. Othman affirmed that Malaysia maintained a strong desire to see a negotiated settlement to the Mindanao conflict because Malaysia's long-term interests were not served by having an "armed Muslim insurgency" on its borders involving groups that have connections to Sabah. A GRP military solution would foster extremism that would pose dangers to Malaysia. Perceptions that Malaysia supported the MILF, or could be used to "strong arm" the MILF, were misinformed. Othman said the GRP was considering asking Indonesia to take over Malaysia's role in the peace process presumably because, he speculated, Jakarta would be more

amenable to Manila's wishes.

18. (C) In an unsolicited comment, Othman stated that related to the Mindanao conflict there were no policy differences between outgoing Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and his deputy Najib Tun Razak, who is slated to take over as Prime Minister at the end of March 2009.

KEITH